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SUBJECT: IRAN'S RAFSANJANI REDUCED TO PLAYING A WAITING GAME?

REF: DUBAI RPO 389

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[11](#). (C) SUMMARY: In a December 9 speech to Qom seminary students, Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi accused Assembly of Experts (AoE) Chairman Hashemi Rafsanjani of working with Iran's enemies against the government. Earlier in the week, pro-IRGC media accused Rafsanjani's daughter Faezeh of seeking to cause popular unrest and separately, the Prosecutor General Mohsen Ezhie called for an investigation in the role Rafsanjani's eldest son Mehdi's played in post-election disturbances. These events indicate the current weakened political state of former President Rafsanjani, a bjte noire for hardline conservatives but someone whom many relatively moderate and even conservative forces within Iran's elites had hoped could play a stabilizing role in the post-election disturbances. However, according to a Rafsanjani family confidante, Rafsanjani's strategy seems to be maintain a low public profile and to outlive vice outwit his opponents: i.e. try to hold on to his remaining institutional power in the hopes of surviving and possibly even succeeding Supreme Leader Khamenei. END SUMMARY.

[12](#). (C) In a December 9 speech to Qom seminary students, Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi accused Assembly of Experts (AoE) Chairman Hashemi Rafsanjani of working with Iran's enemies against the government. Earlier in the week, the pro-IRGC 'Farsnews' accused his daughter Faezeh of seeking to cause popular unrest, while that same day Prosecutor General Mohsen Ezhie said called for an investigation in his eldest son Mehdi's role in post-election disturbances, to include summoning Mehdi from abroad to appear in court (Mehdi has been out of the country since late August).

BACKGROUND

[13](#). (U) Current Assembly of Experts (AoE) Chairman Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has a well-deserved reputation in Iranian political circles for savvy and cunning, and in many ways his stature in Iran's post-revolutionary history is unique:

- he was a student and later close confidante of Khomeini for decades before the Revolution, and is the only one of the original five members of the seminal Revolutionary Council created by Khomeini still alive and active in politics (Khamenei was not one of these five);

- Khomeini named him Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in 1988, and he was one of the principle figures behind the scenes responsible for ending the eight-year Iraq war;

- after Khomeini's 1989 death, he was instrumental in selecting Ayatollah Khamenei as Supreme Leader;

- he has served as Majlis Speaker (1980-89) and President (1989-97), and is now currently both head of the Expediency Council (since 1989) and Chairman of the Assembly of Experts (since 1997).

DIDN'T YOU USED TO BE RAFSANJANI?

14. (C) Rafsanjani's political fortunes began to wane towards the end of his second term as President in the mid- 1990s, when the dominant conservative faction in the Fifth Majlis (1996-2000) increasingly opposed his policies. In 2000, then ex-President Rafsanjani ran for Majlis as a candidate from Tehran, with many believing he would get the highest number of popular votes and become Speaker. Instead, partially due to enmity from Khatami-allied reformists, he finished in 30th place

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in Tehran. Although the Guardian Council subsequently amended the results to put him in 20th place, a humiliated Rafsanjani declined to serve. Rafsanjani's humbling at the polls continued in 2005, when then relative unknown Mahmoud Ahmadinejad beat him in the Presidential election. Although electoral fraud played some part in his defeat, in large measure it was due to popular antipathy towards Rafsanjani, who was widely perceived as the embodiment of corrupt nepotism. Ahmadinejad continued to use Rafsanjani as a whipping horse in his 2009 re-election bid, which was most noticeable for his June 3 televised debate with opponent Mir Hossein Mousavi, in which he attacked former President Rafsanjani by name, heretofore unheard of in Iranian politics.

POST-JUNE 12

15. (C) Rafsanjani's popular standing increased after the June 12 elections and subsequent protests/crackdown, when he was seen by many, both in the masses and among the regime elites, as a voice of reason and a counterweight to Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad, whose actions were seen to have destabilized and weakened the regime. Support for Rafsanjani was highest among the traditional clergy, the business sector, and the 'technocrats' who had by and large staffed the government for much of the 16 years of the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies. Many who opposed the so-called June 12 'coup' hoped that the wily Rafsanjani could outwit and outmaneuver the Supreme Leader/Ahmadinejad-led axis of hardcore conservatives and IRGC security-intelligence types, and in some way undo their seemingly successful power-play. In his public utterances Rafsanjani has stressed the need for popular support of the government, i.e. the 'Republic' component of the 'Islamic

Republic,' which to his detractors indicates his opposition to Supreme Leader Khamenei (i.e. the 'Islamic' component of the ruling government).

¶6. (C) The dominant post June 12 dynamic has been one where Rafsanjani, once the ultimate insider, has been progressively ostracized and weakened by elements within the regime loyal the Supreme Leader and/or Ahmadinejad. Rafsanjani is an interim Friday Prayer Leader in Tehran, an important public forum, but he has only lead prayers once since the election. And as recent events have confirmed, his family is the bête noire of much of the official media, and various security and judicial officials are threatening to move against his family members.

INSIDER'S ACCOUNT

¶7. (S/NF) According to IRPO contact 'Ali,' a prosperous Iranian businessman who grew up among regime elites and who maintains close ties to the Rafsanjani family, Rafsanjani's problems began in the mid-1990s, when then Majlis speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, seeking to become President in 1997, 'turned on' then-President Rafsanjani and sided with the Supreme Leader. Although Khamenei was relatively powerless when Rafsanjani and Ahmad Khomeini arranged to have him installed as Supreme Leader in 1989, over time Khamenei has used his institutional power to develop and extend a vast patronage system. Ali said that Rafsanjani's "retreated too much" in the face of continued encroachments on his power, to the point where he is now "virtually powerless."

¶8. (S/NF) According to Ali, given his relative lack of power Rafsanjani feels he has no hopes of altering the current configuration of power. As such, he is seeking to lobby the uppermost levels of IRGC leadership. While some of these, like Basij Commander BG Naqdi or IRGC Intelligence Organization head Hassan Ta'eb, are firmly aligned with the Supreme Leader, Rafsanjani feels that others, such as IRGC Commander MG Jaafari, are seen as more opportunistic in their allegiances.

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¶9. (S/NF) However, Ali said that the main thrust of Rafsanjani's post -June 12 strategy is basically to try to 'hang on' to his twin remaining bases of institutional power (heading the Assembly of Experts and Expediency Council). Rafsanjani feels he has no hopes to 'roll back' or in some way reverse the events of the last six months, and sees his only salvation as outliving and possibly replacing Supreme Leader Khamenei. Ali said although the 75-year old Rafsanjani is older than the 70-year old Khamenei, the former is in good shape while the latter suffers from depression and takes "a lot of" medication, partially due to pain resulting from the failed June 1981 assassination attempt .

¶10. (S/NF) In this regard Rafsanjani's leadership of the Assembly of Experts, responsible for selecting the Supreme Leader, is especially important. According to Ali, Rafsanjani's March 2009 re-election as Council head happened despite behind the scene efforts by Khamenei to unseat him, and it is likely that Rafsanjani can continue to hold on to power within this organization, although his ongoing leadership of it is by no means a given. However, if Khamenei lives until the next AoE election in late 2014 (elections for this body are every eight years), Ali said it is likely that the Guardian Council will screen candidates so that only pro-Khamenei ones

are approved, and Rafsanjani's influence within this body would be fatally compromised.

¶11. (S/NF) Ali said that for the moment, Rafsanjani perforce must continue to consolidate and maintain his support among the clerical class in general and the senior clergy in particular, not so much in order to 'roll back' what has happened since June 12 but to maintain a basis of support among the clerics in the event that Supreme Leader Khamenei dies before the next AoE elections. In terms of Rafsanjani's position as head of the Expediency Council, although it gives him a forum in which to wield influence, its power derives almost exclusively from the Supreme Leader, and as such its use for Rafsanjani's political fortunes is much less than in the case of the AoE.

¶12. (S/NF) Ali pointed out that the clerical class, including AoE members, are reluctant to challenge the status quo, and Rafsanjani himself has complained to Ali of this collective clerical cowardice. Additionally, despite the aversion if not opprobrium many senior clergy feel towards Khamenei for his relative lack of clerical learning, over the course of his 20-year tenure Khamenei has stripped away much of the clerical class's independence, making senior clerics and their families more reliant, financially and otherwise, on the Supreme Leader.

As such, Rafsanjani was unable to convene an emergency session of the AoE following the June 12 elections and subsequent tumult. When the AoE met for its regularly scheduled biannual meeting on September 22-23 for the first time since June 12, Rafsanjani was unable to muster any sort of organized clerical protest to the elections and subsequent crackdown, with the final resolution strongly supporting SLK (reftel). Indeed, Rafsanjani was barely able to head off a motion within the AoE to expel Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Mohammad Dastgheyib, who had circulated a letter strongly critical of Khamenei.

¶13. (S/NF) COMMENT: A consummate insider, Rafsanjani's popularity among the masses has never been his strong suit (turnout for his two Presidential bids were 54 and 50 percent respectively). Although his political stock among the populace has risen since the elections and their aftermath, his institutional basis of power has been insufficient to challenge the status quo. It is unclear whether, as Ali believes, even if Supreme Leader Khamenei were to die Rafsanjani has sufficient political clout to succeed him. What is clear however is that for the moment Rafsanjani lacks sufficient leverage to change on the ground political realities, and so must reconcile himself to hunkering down and hoping for better days.. END COMMENT.
EYRE